

Gillian

By

Elinora Lord

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... “Gillian,” by Elinora Lord is one of those tales of loss and longing mixed with a desperate realism that is right up my alley.*

Our main character, Gillian, has had sting after string of unnecessary partners having lost what little love she had a decade ago. She pines for the woman she can't have, bangs one out in between making stew, realizes that without her father she probably would've given up on life years ago, and realizes that in a life of regrets one of the only things she can be proud of (even though there have been downsides) is her son.

I find that I like this story because the dichotomy that exists in this woman. She is both a broken, sarcastic wreck and a human being that also wants to have a connection that makes her feel anything akin to joy. For example, in an interaction with her dad, her dad discovers a champagne cork Gillian and her lost interest (Vita) shared while in a different time and different place. The rest of their shared memories she's burned, but what little trinkets she has been able to keep harbor such pain in her present that the cork is both unbearable to look at as well as get rid of – and the wryness and humor of her father's calm acceptance of his daughter's pain is palpable.

There is a grime that covers the language used and Lord has done a great job at crafting not only the perspective of Gillian but creating an overall thematic sense through her sentences. Great lines like, “She stares at the abandoned used condom on the floor of the van—flaccid, sad, and inanimate, as if it were the eviscerated hydro-skeleton of some strange jellyfish. “Yeah. It does.” She grabs her jacket, pushes at the van's heavy door with her good shoulder, and she's free. For the moment, anyway,” not only feel like we see the picture of a woman who doesn't have a conception of her own self worth any more but also the makes the reader feel that same sense of unpleasant ickiness.

I find that to be a great power within this story.

“Gillian,” while a complicated person is definitely a character worth reading about and ultimately is a part of a well-crafted story from Elinora Lord.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language...)*

It's been said that the past is another country; in Gillian's case, it is more than that. It is an enemy combatant. Any object that could possibly function as a passport into this hostile territory runs the risk of emotional high treason and as such is mercilessly discarded. When she turned 30 (nine whole years ago...) she trashed or burned nearly everything sentimental. Including herself. But there were clothes, photos, keepsakes, a napkin with a heart drawn on it from a first official date, all consigned to the flames or the rubbish heap.

GILLIAN

Ollie talks.

Not that Gillian listens. She's too absorbed in the mundane task of fastening her bra, a simple action frustrated by a twinge of back pain, a lingering stiffness in her shoulder, and her own condemning thoughts: *You're getting too old to shag in a van*. Apparently, she's not getting too old for Ollie, though, because he keeps coming back for more; she's continually mystified, flattered, and unable to resist. He's too beautiful. He is too close to physical perfection.

Despite this however her interactions with him frequently disappoint, her sexual and aesthetic experience diminishes substantially with the inevitable occurrence of one very simple thing: He speaks.

She wishes that she had kept a written record of all the epic bloody nonsense that has come out of his mouth over the years because she could have gained some kind of minor social media fame and parleyed a book deal out of it to boot: *Shit My Stupid Shag Buddy Says*. It occurs to her that as far as sordid shag buddies go, she has run the gamut from an Oxford graduate to this, the man who thought that when his sister was pregnant with twins, she'd be pregnant for eighteen months rather than nine. It's her typical anti-accomplishment: From the gutter to the stars and back again.

As Ollie blathers about football he leans over to tie his trainers and this singular movement initiates a glorious symphony of muscle and flesh in stirring, magnificent counterpoint with one another. She longs to trace the perfect trapezoid muscles within reach but doesn't, knowing that he would interpret this as an overture for a

second go-round, which she's not really up for because of the pulled muscle in her lower back and various other reasons that she won't let herself think about.

So, she lets him go on and on about Liverpool and the proliferation of their bloody stupid fans up North.

"They're everywhere," he says, "everywhere! I don't get it. I mean, there must be a Brazilian of them here."

Gillian successfully resists the urge to bang her head on the side of the van.

"Don't you think?" He gazes up at her.

Aw, bless, he's trying to engage her in conversation; it would be touching if it weren't so pathetic. "A Brazilian," she says flatly. She rubs her aching shoulder and pulls on the hideous yellow work apron; she has to give the cafe credit for picking the one colour that makes all pasty white people look like utter shite.

"Yeah. You know. Like a lot. Like more than a million?" Ollie rolls his eyes. "Know maths is not your strong suit Gillian, but Jesus, everyone knows that."

"It's billion," Gillian enunciates with a certain sarcastic slowness that immediately reminds her of Vita, and that makes her want to slam her head against the van until she is unconscious. "You mean billion. Not Brazilian."

He's sceptical, "you sure?"

"A Brazilian is a person. From Brazil," she forces out the point between clenched teeth, "the country."

The light-bulb goes off over Ollie's handsome head, offering only a bare minimal illumination of knowledge.

"Oh. Right, right," he nods vigorously, "okay. Yeah. That makes sense," slow, graceful, and lazy, he pulls on his shirt, "we doing this again next week, maybe?"

"Maybe," she lies, and ties the apron at her back with stiff fingers, catching a hangnail on the waistline of her jeans; she wore jeans to work today and amazingly Claud didn't call her out on it. Ollie said it was because she looked stunning in them. He rarely compliments her, so she figures it must be true. Again, she thinks of Vita, who once said - *you should always wear jeans, it ought to be the law of the land* - woozily stated after one nap, two orgasms, and three glasses of wine, so she was

feeling uncharacteristically munificent that day. And again, she wishes she would stop thinking of Vita, at least immediately after shagging idiots.

Ollie laughs, “it’s weird. You’re really like a bloke sometimes,” he pulls a face. “Shit, that sounds really gay, doesn’t it?”

She stares at the abandoned used condom on the floor of the van—flaccid, sad, and inanimate as if it were the eviscerated hydro-skeleton of some strange jellyfish.

“Yeah. It does,” she grabs her jacket, pushes at the van’s heavy door with her good shoulder, and she’s free. For the moment, anyway.

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At home, the windows are fogged up with steam from the beef stew she’s reheating on the Aga. She’s staring at her own reflection, sullied and blurry, hair all over the bloody place, curling about her jaw, slipping out from her poor excuse for a ponytail. An unremarkable colour at the best of times, but in this steam bleached reflection it is even more limp, even more of a non-colour - an insipid pale brown with a fleck of early grey. And her eyes, staring back at her like the eyes of a ghost, almost too pale to see, almost the same colour as the sky.

“What’s this?” Her dad pipes up. He’s fishing for something in the drawer of the kitchen dresser.

She turns around, “what’s what?”

He’s holding a champagne cork. “Taittinger’s? When were you drinking Taittinger’s?”

He laughs, his eyes twinkle.

Oh, you—stupid slapper, stropy trailer trash, foul-mouthed slattern. Who do you think you are? Someone worthy of fine champagne?

It’s not the kind voice of her father, but the voice of the past that fills her head so unexpectedly.

It’s been said that the past is another country; in Gillian’s case, it is more than that. It is an enemy combatant. Any object that could possibly function as a passport into this hostile territory runs the risk of emotional high treason and as such is mercilessly discarded. When she turned 30 (nine whole years ago...) she trashed or burned nearly everything sentimental. Including herself. But there were clothes, photos,

keepsakes, a napkin with a heart drawn on it from a first official date, all consigned to the flames or the rubbish heap. The cork is an emissary from a different part of the past, however, and she should have got rid of it but couldn't. Not yet, anyway. The cork, the same one she absently touched to her lips that night as she stood in Room 503 of the Belgravia Hotel, fully clothed and ready to leave but unable to as she helplessly stared down at Vita, sprawled face down on the bed in a dead sleep.

Oh, you...

Gillian jams a wooden spoon into the dense, beefy glop of stew, which plops ominously like a volcano stirring from a dormancy of a thousand years.

"Don't remember when."

"Looks recent," he turns the cork over in his hand.

"Bloody cork expert now, are you?" She throws him a sideways glance through the steam and he smiles at her, that sweet smile that always gets her right in the chest. *You'd better not ever bloody die.* She thinks. A thought so often passing through her head that it had now become a sort of mantra, something she had to think daily to save his life.

He gives a vague nod of his head, amusement behind his eyes as he places the cork carefully back into the drawer.

The front door opens, the hall floorboards creak, and for the briefest of moments she feels the gritty unevenness of those floorboards against her bloody cheek, and hears that voice in her head; *God it was fun breaking you, Gillian.*

"Granddad," Ryan drops a school bag down by the leg of the dining table and claps a hand over his granddad's shoulder.

"What's for dinner?"

She feels his presence behind her. She wants to turn and hug him, draw him close and apologise for everything; for the stew, for the bad weather, for not knowing who his father was...for being such a disappointment.

"Thought you ate at school?" She says instead.

She hears him groan, can just about make out his reflection behind her in the window.

“Bloody salad.”

He wraps his arms around her waistline and she swats at his wrists with her free hand.

“Language.”

Her dad hums sympathetically from the corner of the room.

“What’s news?” She asks absently, glancing at him before turning to the washing up in the sink.

“The usual,” he shrugs. He’s wearing the hoody she bought him for Christmas.

“Sounds fascinating,” she says, mouth full affectionate sarcasm as she notices the holes in his cuffs.

“Actually, there is a bit of news, about our hermit next-door neighbour.”

She feels the skin just above the veins in her wrist begin to buzz and she plunges her hands into the too-hot water.

“Vita?” She doesn’t know why she’s asking, they only have one neighbour for miles around.

“So, what’s the news?” She prompts while Ryan nods through a gulp of coke from a bottle she hadn’t noticed he was holding.

“Looks like she’s got herself a girlfriend.”

Gillian is glad she’s facing the window. She waits for the sky and the land to do their usual trick of calming her, bringing her peace. She studies the thin band of clouds frosting the blue sky, the way the wind presses into the long, faded grass. She squeezes the steel wool pad in her hand. Watery brown gunk from the pot she’s been scrubbing surrenders to the drain and she predicts by the end of the week she’ll have to take apart the pipes again to work out the clog. Didn’t expect her to remain on the market forever, did you? Despite the fact that she was a middle-aged woman.... *a widow, a posh bitch, a recluse...*

Put like that, Gillian asks herself, *why are you so keen on her, you dozy cow?*

She dries her hands with a towel and turns around. Keeping her hands busy always settles her nerves. She can tell by the way Ryan looks at her that he’s waiting for her to trot out some smart-arsed remark, some homophobic put-down.

“Good,” she says softly. She clears her throat and tries it again—this time firmer and louder, and almost convinces herself, “that’s good.”

“You met her?” Her dad asks from the dresser. He’s left the drawer open. She stares at it, unblinking, while Ryan answers.

“Briefly. She was leaving when we showed up. They were kind of giggly together. It was cute.”

Gillian twirls the limp, damp dish-towel into a sinewy rope and attempts fashioning a hangman’s noose out of it.

“She seems cool. Didn’t talk to her for long but she was funny, smart. Her name is Sacha. Works in finance or something. There was an article on her and her family in the Courier yesterday—Clarissa was telling me, God, I think even Clarissa likes her—anyway, the family’s really posh and they set up some new scholarship fund for, you know, ‘underprivileged students,’” Ryan employs the good old air quotes around the phrase—a Vita sarcasm speciality, and again Gillian suspects that he has a crush on Vita, even as she simultaneously acknowledges the fierce irrationality of her ridiculous jealousy. At this pathetic moment, she is even jealous of the Jeep Cherokee she sees parked in Vita’s drive every morning, jealous of it for its close proximity to its owner, not to mention the front seat.

Oh, Christ, you are bananas.

“Maybe you should apply,” her dad says.

“I’m not underprivileged. Right, Mum?”

Gillian hums absently.

“Mum?”

“Yeah?”

Amused, Ryan smirks, “why are you making a noose with the dish-towel?”

Her dad propels himself from the edge of the dresser. “My cue to leave, before she gets any ideas.”

Oh, that joke isn’t funny anymore.

“I’ll join you.” Ryan follows his granddad from the room. Gillian hears the creak of the sofa as they sit down in the sitting room, a pause, then the welcome murmur of the television.

She fishes for her phone in the pocket of her jeans, flicks the screen on and hits Google...

This is what she has become.... someone who stalks a former shag buddy with whom you have the grave and stupid misfortune of being in love. It’s exhausting. She yawns. After a good ten minutes, she is finally online and hopping to the Courier’s website, where the fluff piece on Vita’s new woman is found easily enough.

In Gillian’s mind, there are two types of Englishwomen: The Roses and the Weeds. Vita, of course, is a Rose: pale and elegant, seemingly perfect, secretly thorny, and bitchily unrepentant when blood is drawn. She herself is, of course, a sturdy English Weed: tough, available, and usually trampled upon by blokes in obsessive pursuit of the Roses. Tristan alone is proof of the paradox. When they weren’t shagging, they were drinking and talking about Vita; a shared loathing of the same woman bonded them more than sex ever did.

But Jennifer Elena Sacheverell Easley Parmenter—Jesus Christ, Gillian thinks, what kind of person needs five fucking names? —is a voluptuous variation on the Weed: A bit horsey-looking but well-groomed, well-dressed, and possessing abundant dark locks a la Nigella Lawson. Not to mention big tits. No, she is not a common English Weed; this lady’s not for trampling. She’s the weed that will wrap with luxurious abandon around everything in a garden till it’s hers, that will scale the stone walls of the mansion until her wild garlands smother everything in sight. In the photo, she’s smiling handsomely, about ready to burst out of her blouse, and sandwiched between two happy teenagers and a man, whom Gillian is pretty certain she might have shagged.

Gillian reads on. Jennifer—is a CEO of a digital music company. Even though she and her fucking ex-husband, a fucking barrister, both went to fucking Cambridge she fucking supported her fucking son when he wanted to go to fucking Oxford. Her fucking father is a fucking marquis and—here Gillian dies a little—her fucking Italian

mother is a fucking “member of the distinguished, aristocratic Milanese family” that includes the filmmaker Luchino Fucking Visconti.

Defeated, she leans back in the chair. Sure, great. That’s just great. She manages one final, rallying thought: Can Jennifer single-handedly replace a toilet? Plumb in a washing machine or rewire a house? Bet not. Top that, bitch. “Fucking slag.”

Gillian does not realize she’s said this aloud until Ryan calls loudly from the couch: “Who’s a fucking slag?”

“The Queen,” she shouts back.

“Too right. Always thought she was a bit tarty with all those hats.”

She scowls, realizes her mother was right so many years ago when she still had possession of at least a few marbles; Someday you’ll have one of your own, and they’ll be mouthing off to you the way you do to me, and you’ll be sorry then.

She is very sorry indeed. About a lot of things, but not that.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Gillian has always been a character that I have played around with, put in various situations and worked with quite a lot, however I had never delved into the reasons why she behaved as she did.

With *Gillian*, I decided to make her the titular character, as well as exploring her past, her jealousy and the effect that unrequited love had on her, as well as showing her abusive past. It was, however, important to me that I didn't make her past as the victim of domestic violence the main storyline of this piece, as it was crucial this wasn't shown as the main defining event that made her who she is, merely a piece in the tapestry of the making of herself.

To read other pieces in the creation of Gillian Wild, please see [Would You Like Some Wine With Your Epiphany?](#) and [The Art of Almost](#)

AUTHOR BIO: Influenced by David Bowie, Virginia Woolf and Sally Wainwright, Elinora Lord is a lesbian writer of stage, screen, fiction, poetry and radio from the UK.

Her novel, *Everland* has been selected for the **Penguin and Random House WriteNow 2021 Editorial Programme**, and her short films have been selected by **Pinewood Studios & Lift-Off Sessions, Cannes Film Festival, Raindance Film Festival, Camden Fringe Festival and Edinburgh Fringe Festival**, while her theatre shows have been performed in **London's West End** and on **Broadway**, where she won the award for **Best Monologue**.

Elinora is also working on *The Art of Almost*, a lesbian comedy-drama radio series as well as writing a television drama series and the sequel to her novel, *Everland*.

